

Chip Heath and Dan Heath. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York: Random House, 2007. 291 pages, \$24.95

Richard Maxwell and Robert Dickman. *The Elements of Persuasion: Use Storytelling to Pitch Better Business, Sell Faster, and Win More Business*. New York: Collins. 242 pages, \$19.95

I confess that, on a rare occasion, I just get tired of reading homiletics-oriented books. But I remain curious about communication, how it works, and what to do when it doesn't. So lately, I have indulged my desire for some extended reading in secular, non-homiletic literature, which, nevertheless, has provided some insight into preaching and into communication in general. I especially like the first of the above mentioned books. I have read and benefited from both, but the first is more germane to preaching, I think. Certainly the subtitle is less off-putting. In fact, I am using *Made to Stick* as a text for the introductory preaching course and for a communication-in-ministry class.

I find these sorts of books interesting for a couple of reasons. One is that the business/corporate world is interested in effective communication. For several years I taught management development (communication skills) for an international accounting firm. Every school that its employees attended had a module on communication. Augustine certainly recognized that rhetorical/communication skills were available for all to use so why not avail ourselves of that knowledge and use it for our own good purposes? A recent student told me her son was startled to see her reading *Made to Stick*; all the new hires at his large company received it. Second, the information in these books is often presented in an easily accessible format which makes it easier for overworked management types to get onto the ideas. Harried pastors do not always have time or energy to wade through more scholarly tomes either. Just because it is popularized knowledge does not mean it is evil or false. It can provide a starting point for further exploration. Heath and Heath employ a simple mnemonic for "sticky" ideas: SUCCES, that is, simple, unexpected, concrete, emotional, stores. The lack of the last "s" is a bit maddening, isn't it? There are plenty of examples from advertising but also less commercial environments as well. Students have said they find the information in the book to be helpful in varied ways.

The book by Maxwell and Dickman covers similar ground, although its emphasis is primarily on the use of story. They add another mnemonic: PHAAT. Every good story needs PHAAT: passion, a hero, an antagonist, awareness of how the story opens new possibilities or insights, and transformation of the hero and those who identify with the hero (24). One chapter on each of the factors makes up the rest of the book. These factors might help preachers tell more engaging stories, if only to tell them with greater passion or emotional energy and a clearer sense of how the story fits into the preaching.

Why use stories as a communication strategy? According to the authors, stories are contagious; scalable; they bring people together; they are based on "a natural human response to the unexpected;" and they can connect teller and listener to a "commonly held core passion" (66-67).

Dan Ariely. *Predictably Irrational: The Hidden Forces That Shape Our Decisions*. New York: Harper. 280 pages, \$24.95

Richard H. Thaler and Cass R. Sunstein. *Nudge: Improving Decisions About Health, Wealth, and Happiness*. New Haven: Yale University Press. 293 pages, \$26.00

What was true with the earlier pair of books is true here as well; they cover similar ground, although in different ways. Both are good reads. Both have been reviewed favorably in *Business Week* and have been on other best-seller lists. They may not help the preacher to craft Sunday's sermon more quickly, but they do provide some insight into why people do what they do and why they make the decisions they make. That last sentence may have you thinking about comparisons to televangelists, selling snake oil, or suddenly finding yourself "upside down" in deceptive sub-prime mortgage schemes. Ariely's book is written from a more personal, less theoretical perspective but is no less informative. Both books explore the uncritical, even unrecognized role of emotion in decision making. The research field is known as behavioral economics or judgment and decision making.

Ariely warns, "With everything you do, in fact, you should train yourself to question your repeated behaviors" (44). Work environments are recognizing the value of "social exchange" (80). "[S]ocial norms are one of the best ways to make workers loyal, as well as motivated" (81). This could certainly be exploited but it could also be recognized as an important factor in, for example, designing and implementing parish programming. Indeed, this is apparently what many large congregations do – create smaller, more personal groups. However, unless this is perceived as a deeply embedded value, the effect soon will wear off.

Nudge takes a broader, cultural/institutional view of the landscape and makes more of a prescriptive turn by employing what it terms "libertarian paternalism." "The libertarian aspect of our strategies lies in the straightforward insistence that, in general, people should be free to do what they like...." The paternalistic aspect lies in the claim that it is legitimate for choice architects to try to influence people's behavior in order to make their lives longer, healthier, and better" (5). People make "decisions they would not have made if they had paid full attention and possessed complete information unlimited cognitive abilities, and complete self-control" (5). "Libertarian paternalism is a relatively weak, soft, and nonintrusive type of paternalism because choices are not blocked, fenced off, or significantly burdened" (5). Again, one can see potential for danger here. But if nothing else, since we do live "in" the world, we at least need to know what "they" are up to.